

Tailored to Transform: The Presentation of Fashion as Transformative

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Introduction

Over the course of the last century, much scholarship discusses fashion's broader implications as related to the individual and society. For example, in 1904 the sociologist Georg Simmel notes fashion's dual nature: clothing choices are meant to distinguish an individual from the rest of society, while simultaneously establishing an individual as part of broader society. Other scholars see fashion as an example of the broader phenomenon of attaching symbolic values to the consumption of certain commodities (Gronow). In other words, material goods become associated with specific values. The consumer then uses these goods to display the values that he or she may hold. Because of this relation between the consumers and the commodities, clothing affects and expresses the perception of how many view themselves.

Since the concept of fashion has a variety of meanings and connotations, the term "fashion" tends to remain somewhat of a broad term. Fashion most frequently refers to highly visible styles of clothing. Although to a lesser extent, fashion may also refer to aspects of culture beyond clothing that are highly esteemed at that particular moment in time. Additionally, the term may refer to systems that produce new styles of clothing and attempt to make them desirable to the public (Crane and Bovone 320). This project primarily considers the most frequently used definition of fashion – fashion as highly variable styles of clothing.

One can view fashion as transformative. This transformation may occur on a variety of levels: between the individual and society, between the individual's exterior and interior selves, and between language and the garment.

This project examines a variety of texts that establish fashion as a means of transformation. Each text provides somewhat different interpretations of fashion's transformative

power. Nevertheless, all are engaged in the depiction of fashion as a much broader phenomenon than just the garments that one chooses to wear.

At first glance, Roland Barthes seems to present fashion as anti-transformative. Fashion appears to function as a myth and, thus, is used by the bourgeoisie to uphold, rather than change, the dominant class structure. The details of certain garments also function as almost imperceptible visual cues that maintain the existing social order. Despite fashion's inability to transform an individual's relationship to society in terms of class structure, the written language of fashion transforms the individual's relationship to the garment through inciting desire and, as a myth, the artifice of fashion becomes transformed into something that becomes perceived as a natural phenomenon.

On the other hand, fashion as presented in two texts written about Second Empire France becomes overtly transformative. Most of this transformation occurs between an individual and his or her relationship to society, thereby challenging the dominant class structure. Nevertheless, this transformation establishes itself ultimately transient. There appears to be a heightened concern about dress during the Second Empire, a time where both the imperial court and the masses engaged wore highly visible, and often decadent, fashions. In the novel *Nana* by Émile Zola, clothing choices function as a vehicle to alter the protagonist Nana's relationship to the rest of society. In Baudelaire's essay "The Painter of Modern Life," fashion similarly transforms the dandy apart from broader society. But fashion also performs the other aspect of its dual nature: transforming individual members of society into the crowd through their ubiquitous adoption of trends.

Walter Benjamin's *The Arcades Project* presents fashion as symptomatic of modern society with its constant adjustment of its own appearance. Clothes are presented as primarily

superficial and, thus, their transformative power occurs upon the surface. Fashion choices, for example, only can change one's external self, not one's internal self. Fashion also constantly presents its own self as a transformation. With even the slightest alteration of a small detail on the garment, fashion incorrectly depicts itself as constantly innovative. For Benjamin, fashion is a permutation of the world: ever-hastening fashion trends parallel the ever-increasing movement of modern life. This increasing trend cycle serves to uphold the existing economic structure in a way that is akin to Barthes's view of fashion as maintaining power. Benjamin also sees death as a final outcome of fashion as is suggested in *Nana*.

The different sociological interpretations of fashion can be bridged by examining fashion's broader association with transformation. Although each text presents fashion as transformative, fashion's power may occur on a variety of levels from the superficial to the formation of an individual's identity and can, therefore, have a variety of implications as to how one views the self and society.

Chapter 1. Myth: Transformation at the Site of Language

Although influential across numerous fields of study (not limited to sociology, fashion, and literary criticism), Roland Barthes leaves behind nothing that can be considered wholly Barthesian. A lack of Barthesian identity connects to Barthes's unstable idea of the self. Much of his writing relates to the analysis of the self, a concept that remains somewhat ambiguous throughout his works. In his earlier writings, Barthes rejects the self as an integral part of a text; however, in his autobiography entitled *Roland Barthes* he elaborately constructs it. Within *Roland Barthes*, his identity becomes tied to various descriptors and through language itself. The self as constructed by his autobiography overdramatizes and, perhaps, parodies the creation of identity. On the other hand, in *Camera Lucida* Barthes singularly unites his self with his mother, or rather the loss of his mother (*Roland Barthes* 156). Therefore, Barthes's self is a tenuous concept because it constantly evolves over time throughout his own writing. This constantly changing self contributes to the impossibility of confining the work of Barthes into one simple academic school of thought.

Early on in his career, Barthes developed an interest in semiology, "a science that studies the life of signs within society" (Saussure 16). His foray into semiology began in the 1950s. Alongside semiology, he examined the construction of identity in relation to mass culture. In the early 1960s, the work of Barthes primarily shifted away from semiology toward structuralism. Another shift occurred in his work in the late 1960s when his work shifted away from structuralism toward what can be considered post-structuralism, although that term's validity as a separate entity from structuralism is oft-contested.

Although there is a development over time through various academic schools of thought, Barthes remains outside of simple categorization. Many works of Barthes, for example, can be

simultaneously viewed as works of different academic schools of thought (Rivière 9). Thus, the works of Barthes, and even Barthes himself, cannot be seen as existing within discrete intervals of specific academic discourses and schools of thought: they largely transcend simple categorization.

Despite a somewhat futile search for a stable idea of the self or a prevailing school throughout his oeuvre, Barthes maintained a marked interest in cultural analysis throughout much of his works. Unlike his contemporaries, Barthes applied traditional linguistic techniques to a realm outside of literary writing. By broadening the applicability of linguistic techniques, Barthes was able to use semiological approaches as a means for cultural analysis. Barthes applied semiological techniques to nontraditional and, arguably, non-elite elements of culture, such as film, photography, and fashion. This application of semiological techniques outside of traditional literature formed the foundation of what later became known as cultural studies.

Most notably, Barthes applies linguistic techniques to aspects of popular society in *Mythologies*. Alongside *Camera Lucida*, *Mythologies* remains his most widely read work in the United States and in the United Kingdom (Samoyault 248). *Mythologies* consists of a catalog of “current social phenomena,” or myths, followed by a fairly long essay entitled “Myth Today” (*Mythologies* 11). Published as a series of essays between 1954 and 1956, the catalog of myths includes, but is definitely not limited to, wrestling matches, laundry detergents, and children’s toys. Although Barthes claimed to have arbitrarily chosen which myths to include in *Mythologies*, every myth is unified by its existence in “French daily life” and its perpetuation by mass media (*Mythologies* 11).

At the time it was published in 1958, *Mythologies* was considered a radical text and shortly thereafter became influential in French academic thought. In the 1960s, the project of

“demystifying the cultural messages that permeate was considered a revolutionary project” (Rivière 14). Barthes treated both the products of elite culture and mass culture as important facets of society. He saw mass culture as necessarily shaping the people of society throughout both the past and the present.

Unlike many other preeminent thinkers in the mid-twentieth century, Barthes developed a unique perspective that was cultivated primarily outside of academia. “Having spent many years away from centres of learning and the French literary scene, Barthes had a culture of his own and was not influenced by intellectual fashions” (Rivière 12). Having been afflicted with chronic tuberculosis throughout much of his young adulthood, Barthes periodically resided in “sanatoria and convalescence homes” rather than immediately continuing his education after his completion of a *baccalauréat* (Rivière 9). After fully recovering from tuberculosis in his thirties, Barthes had “limited work experience and limited career prospects” (Rivière 10). During his illness, Barthes had read extensively and developed Marxist-inspired political views, which were indeed radical at the time. Barthes also began taking up various short-term positions both within and outside of France. During a short-term stint as a language assistant at the University of Alexandria, Barthes became interested in linguistics. Around this time, Barthes wrote most of the pieces in *Mythologies*, the work that had made him famous (Rivière 10).

In 1960, after the success of *Mythologies*, Barthes became fully immersed in academia. He received an appointment at a relatively minor French university and gave weekly seminars there (Rivière 11). Barthes’s relative outsider status was also evident in some of his contemporaries’ reluctance to further grant him academic positions. They viewed his pursuit of cultural studies as not well suited for the realm of academia (“Roland Barthes, 1947-1960” 9-10). Despite their reluctance, Barthes was later granted various academic positions at numerous

universities where he continued to explore the field of what can now be considered cultural studies.

This essay will primarily examine the work of Barthes and its relationship to fashion through his *Mythologies* as his broad sociological approach to linguistics provides a useful means by which to view various cultural phenomena. The essay “Myth Today” presents both a sociological understanding of myth and outlines the semiological framework of myth as a meta-language. According to Barthes, myth is a meta-language because it is a second language built upon typical language, consisting of a sign. Meta-language speaks about the other language. The meta-language that is myth causes assumptions to be made about the initial sign that it is constructed upon.

The simplest definition of myth, according to Barthes, is that “myth is a type of speech” (*Mythologies* 109). Speech is not just confined to oral speech; rather, speech is anything that is a message (e.g. a work of literature, an advertisement, a photograph). By broadening the definition of speech, Barthes is able to apply linguistic principles to numerous aspects of mass culture because they fall under the broader definition of speech as a message.

In addition to being a type of speech, myth is more specifically a “second-order semiological system” (*Mythologies* 114). For Barthes, a semiological system contains three terms: the signified, the signifier, and the sign. In its simplest terms, a sign is a unification of the signified and the signifier. Typically, the signifier is understood as the form of the sign and the signified is understood as the meaning of the sign. The relationship between the signified and the signifier, though, is not one of equality, but rather of equivalence (*Mythologies* 112). The meaning of a sign then is not merely a universal signified, as equivalence implies a greater degree of flexibility in which to view a sign that may be dependent upon cultural understanding.

Fundamentally, the sign is arbitrary because there is “no natural connection between the signifier and the signified” (Rivière 25).

One of the simplest ways to understand the semiological framework is through language, which operates as a first-order semiological system. I will demonstrate a simple semiological framework through the word “apple.” The acoustic image, the sound of the word “apple,” is the signifier. The signified is the concept behind the string of letters; in this case, it is a fruit. The sign is the word “apple” because it unifies both the string of letters and the concept.

Myth, being a second order sign, is more complex: it is a sign essentially layered on top of another sign. Being a second order sign, myth encompasses both a signified and another sign, which also consists of a signifier and a signified. Myth has both first order of signification and second order of signification. Connotation is a second-order of signification, which uses the denotative sign (signifier and signified) as its signifier and attaches to it an additional signified. In this framework, connotation is a sign, which derives from the signifier of a denotative sign (so denotation leads to a chain of connotations). This is the mechanism by which a myth may seem to signify one thing ends up becoming imbued with multiple meanings. Due to the numerous ways to read a myth, myth is by its very nature ambiguous. This ambiguity leads to a misrepresentation of a myth’s more latent signified. According to Barthes, “myth hides nothing and flaunts nothing: it distorts” (*Mythologies* 129). Through this distortion, myth naturalizes a concept. The myth itself becomes accepted as a natural fact of society without ever having to account for its underlying assumptions that may be problematic both politically and socially. A myth has the ability to come across as trivial and harmless, while at the same time acting as a veneer for potentially problematic assumptions about society. Essentially, society may accept a myth as true without ever grasping the implications that the myth embodies.

Although Barthes presents a wide catalog of cultural mythologies, I found his discussion about ornamental cookery analogous to a discussion about fashion. In a way that is similar to the dissemination of fashion, ornamental cookery becomes propagated largely through magazines primarily aimed at females. In this essay, Barthes describes the ornate cuisine presented in *Elle*, a women's magazine popular among the French petit-bourgeois class in the mid-twentieth century. Barthes describes the food as "ornamental": thick glazes conceal the actual food and food becomes un-naturalized (*Mythologies* 78). "Chicken is made to appear pink" and mushrooms and holly leaves are strewn on top of "a traditional log-shaped Christmas cake" (*Mythologies* 79). The cookery in *Elle* is, at the very least, impractical. Furthermore, this ornamental cookery scarcely resembles the food that is actually consumed by the magazine's middle-class readers. The food presented in *Elle* does not conceal its artifice, but rather the food becomes a "cuisine of advertisement, totally magical" (*Mythologies* 79). The dispersion of ornamental cooking by mass media naturalizes the concept of ornamental cooking for society. Furthermore, the myth of ornamental cookery distracts its middle-class readers. The readers of *Elle* become so concerned with being able to create ornamentation on food that they forget to acknowledge "the real problem": how are they actually going to be able to afford this food?

Just as ornamental cooking conceals the naturalness of food for consumption, the excessive ornamentation on clothing serves to conceal the use-value of clothing. Something useful, clothing, becomes much more than a means to cover one's body, just as food in ornamental cookery becomes much more than providing nourishment and pleasurable taste. Deeming certain garments as fashionable transforms clothing into a myth, which hides the use-value of a garment.

Although many of Barthes's cultural mythologies take on a somewhat playful tone due to their subject matter, *Myth Today* is largely somber in its presentation of myth: myth is co-opted as a tool by the dominant political structure. Myth is seen as inalienable and also tied to the nation; however, bourgeois society aligns itself with the very idea of a nation. The term bourgeois is definitely broad and has had slightly different iterations throughout its existence in capitalist society. But, nonetheless, Barthes describes the bourgeois class as the ever-present class, which maintains a certain ownership, order, and ideology (*Mythologies* 137-138). At its core, this class fundamentally resists revolutionary change.

The bourgeoisie seek to maintain power by eternalizing the myths of society and conserving the existing social structures. Fundamentally, they resist change (*Mythologies* 149). The bourgeoisie, consequently, do not espouse explicitly political language that accompanies such change. They may, however, appropriate political language in a way that is not used for transitory purposes in society.

By maintaining the status quo in society, bourgeois society maintains its political power as afforded by the very idea of the nation. Now, "there are no 'bourgeois' parties" with political power – bourgeois society refuses to be named yet it is ever-present (*Mythologies* 138). Barthes calls the bourgeoisie's refusal to be named and refusal to draw attention to themselves as a class exnomination.

Whatever the accidents, the compromises, the concessions, the political adventures, whatever the technical, economic, or even social changes which history brings us, our society is still a bourgeois society. (*Mythologies* 137)

Since the bourgeois society deems itself as equivalent to a capitalist national society, the existence of a non-bourgeois culture or morality is seen as having been merely borrowed from

bourgeois ideology. Essentially, we can view bourgeois society as an all-absorbing entity that permeates every creation in society as a whole. Due to exnomination, “bourgeois ideology can therefore spread over everything and in so doing lose its name without risk: no one here will throw this name of bourgeois back at it” (*Mythologies* 139).

The application of myth to the sociological sphere makes *Mythologies* a revolutionary text. Myth is not merely confined to its ideological dimension, as Levi-Strauss and other structuralist scholars posited. Through broadening both the definition and applications of myth, Barthes creates room for a critique of large cultural phenomena, including fashion.

Unlike *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes’s *The Fashion System* is not a commonly read text. After his widespread success with *Mythologies* and his academic appointment in 1960, Barthes completed his doctoral thesis, which was then published as *The Fashion System* (Roland Barthes 93). In this book, Barthes privileges the written component of clothing (i.e., clothing as described by fashion magazines) over both the image of clothing and the garment itself. Furthermore, he “believed that nothing significant existed beyond the realm of the written” (Samoyault 251). Barthes constructs an entire semiological system around fashion through the use of excerpts from two French fashion magazines, *Elle* and *Les Jardin des modes*, published between 1958 and 1959.

As opposed to a photograph of an item of clothing, fashion writing focuses the magazine reader’s attention onto certain aspects, or details, of the garment. The details then combine together in order to form a complete garment. The very nature of fashion writing “orients the perception of the image” (*Fashion System* 16). The inclusion or exclusion of certain details manipulates the way in which the reader views the garment as a whole. Essentially, fashion writing functions as a caption, pointing to the garment’s context and how one should view the

garment. On the other hand, the understanding of an image of the garment does not remain confined to details and allows the reader to form a more autonomous perception of the garment at hand. Barthes discusses a dress presented by a fashion magazine. The photograph of that dress, or any garment, according to Barthes, is limitless: "it can be looked at indefinitely or in the blink of an eye" (*Fashion System* 16). In contrast, the description of that same dress "begins at its belt, continues on to a rose and ends in shetland; the dress itself is barely mentioned" (*Fashion System* 16).

Fashion's transformative power, thus, exists at the site of the written component of clothing. The language of fashion changes the individual's relationship to the garment, creating a desire for consumption, as "it is not the object but the name that creates desire; it is not the dream but the meaning that sells" (*Fashion System* xii). The actual wearing of clothes, though, does not do anything to transform one's self. Barthes presents the actual wearing of clothes as a largely passive action: "To dress in order to act is, in a certain way, not to act, it is to display the being of doing, without assuming its reality" (qtd. in "Fashion System"). It is the act of naming the garment and, more broadly language, not the garment itself, which alters an individual's desire. Of course, it is only desire that changes, something that can be used to incite consumption.

Like the extensive use of details in fashion writing, the attention to the way details function arises throughout Barthes's other essays relating to fashion. For example, in the essay entitled "Dandyism and Fashion" Barthes sees the details in the garment itself as providing subtle visual cues for the maintenance of the existing class regime. Modern fashion (clothes produced after the French Revolution, according to Barthes) grounds itself in a supposed uniform style of garments across differing social classes ("Dandyism and Fashion" 60).

Even in fashion's more modern iterations, this, in theory, universal way of dressing exists. Take, for instance, a pair of dark-wash straight-leg jeans. A similar pair of these jeans can be found at both designer stores and high-street stores. Shoppers at designer stores and high-street stores likely differ greatly in socio-economic status. Despite an illusion of equality among different social classes through access to similar garments, the "social classes [are] not abolished at all" ("Dandyism and Fashion" 60).

For Barthes, the existing social classes are actually reinforced through the inclusion of specific, almost invisible details within garments themselves – "the knot on a cravat, the material of a shirt, the buttons on a waistcoat, the buckle on a shoe" ("Dandyism and Fashion" 60). The different details among clothes serve to display even the smallest of social differences. Certain details may be seen as in bad taste or as tacky, whereas others may be indicative of luxury. There exists a "need to maintain a certain number of formal differences which could exhibit the difference between social classes" ("Dandyism and Fashion" 60). After the French Revolution (a revolution grounded in the notion of equality), for example, the former aristocracy differentiated themselves from the bourgeoisie and the bourgeoisie differentiated themselves from the lower classes. The garment, thus, for Barthes has no transformative power in relation to the individual and society. Clothing, in fact, acts inherently against transformation: it stabilizes the existing class hierarchy.

Throughout *The Fashion System* and many of his essays on fashion, Barthes can be seen as having an antagonistic relationship with fashion. For example, he posits that a fashion magazine through its use of language "[changes] an arbitrary link into a natural property or technical affinity, in short providing fashion creations with the guarantee of being eternal or empirically necessary" (*Fashion System*). Thus, fashion writing naturalizes fashion, something

that is inherently not natural. This distrust of fashion in many ways fuses with Barthes's cynical understanding of myth in *Myth Today*.

One of the many instances where fashion falsely appears to be a consequence of natural phenomena is in the creation of trends. A trend, or what is fashionable and popular, appears to arise naturally. In a seemingly democratic fashion, people begin choosing to wear a certain trendy fashion item, whether that trendy item is a certain accessory or a specific shirt style. Soon enough, the trend becomes widespread and sold commonly. Despite the illusion of organic popularity, trends often arise from luxury brands during fashion week and are enforced by fashion publications. The existence of constantly regurgitated trends creates pressure for people to continually update their wardrobes and spend their money in doing so. Of course, this maintains the same economic hierarchy. The money spent by the lower classes in obtaining the new trends only lessens the wealth that they hold. The wealthy, though, are able to acquire these new fashionable objects without a proportionately equivalent amount of economic sacrifice.

Barthes expressed “a feeling of impatience at the sight of the ‘naturalness’ with which newspaper, art, and common sense dress up reality...Undoubtedly determined by ‘history’” (Bennett 150). All too often components of contemporary culture are incorrectly understood as natural facts: economic structures, fashion, and cars. For Barthes, the dangers of contemporary culture center on their ability to distort history. In fact, “the very principle of myth” is that “it transforms history in Nature” (*Mythologies* 129).

Myth Today culminates in its section entitled “The Bourgeoisie as a Joint Stock Company.” In this section, Barthes provides an answer as to whom myth benefits. For Barthes, myth is an elaborate “scam.” Although this scam occurs in plain sight, its very use makes the ruling class invisible. Through exnomination, the “bourgeois” culture is naturalized as

synonymous with “national” and the “ideological” becomes “universal.” Essentially all aspects of modern day culture are predicated on “the representation of that which the bourgeoisie have and make us have” (qtd. in Bennett 151).

Fashion, for Barthes, enacts transformation on two levels: the level of language as presented in the *Fashion System* and on the level of the creation of myth in “Myth Today.” The former affects people’s desires and the latter naturalizes the unnatural. Both of these so-called transformations, though, do little to actually shift a person’s place in society. The person remains locked into his or her maintained position in the dominant social hierarchy.

Since “everything, in everyday life” covertly confirms the existence of a dominant political and economic power, one has to wonder if a participant in popular culture is ultimately powerless (*Mythologies* 140). Despite the seeming powerlessness, Barthes offers a solution as to how we should approach myths: “it is the reader of myths himself who must reveal their essential function” (*Mythologies* 129). So bearing his proclamation in mind, I will untangle the myth that is fashion. By examining some literature surrounding fashion, I will examine the ways in which fashion is used to establish and transform an individual’s relationship to society.

Chapter 2. Second Empire French Fashion: Style and Society

Like the centuries before and, arguably, today, Paris was considered the forefront of fashion in the mid-nineteenth century. Fashion magazines, like *Journal des dames et des modes* and *La dernière mode*, gained extensive readership among different social classes in France. Born from the earlier fashion plates, aristocratic portraits, and fashion dolls, fashion magazines often revealed fashion trends to those eager to learn about what they should be wearing. These magazines combined lifestyle commentary and fashion tips alongside advertising. Like the later fashion magazines in the 1950s that Barthes analyzed in *The Fashion System*, the fashion magazines combined both image (sketches and etchings in the early iterations of fashion magazines) and text.

Fashion magazines often became a space in which the individual saw how she should behave in accordance with broader society. This role, of course, changed over the course of the nineteenth century. In the 1850s and 1860s, fashion magazines primarily depicted a woman's role as a homemaker. By the mid-1870s, though, many magazines were "running stories that glamorized showy clothes and illustrations of beautifully dressed women in public spaces" (Gershon). Additionally, many images depicted women shopping. Fashion magazines spread the idea that women can exist in the public eye and that fashion was meant to be visible in these public spaces. This new concern in visibility was also echoed in the politics of the Second Empire. The newly formed imperial government was widely seen as illegitimate, so "it could not realistically stake its authority on grounds of birthright, lineage, or even great achievement." According to historians, Emperor Louis-Napoleon and Empress Eugénie sought to create a new court whose rank would be determined by levels of glamour and elegance (Phenix 8). In Second

Empire France, those in power used fashion as a visual tool to create the allusion of authority and competence.

In addition to the widespread circulation of fashion magazines and the reliance on fashions by the court, Paris was the site of numerous arcades, also known as the Covered Passages of Paris. The arcades, an early form of the shopping mall, contained pedestrianized interiors and rows of stores. Several of the arcades in Paris still exist; however, in the nineteenth century they were widespread throughout a large portion of Paris and existed as a site of lavish consumption and fashion. Although the court still influenced fashion in the Second Empire, “fashion increasingly centered on commercial public entertainments such as panoramas, arcades, theaters, cafés...and pleasure gardens” (Tombs 315).

A growing consumer culture alongside the industrial revolutions and a growing middle class also helped shape the development of fashion in the mid-nineteenth century. Textiles were now considerably more affordable and, thus, more accessible for many (qtd. in Benjamin 77). Because of industrialization the latest fashions were produced quicker than they had been in previous times. Additionally, the increase in affordability allowed those from a non-elite stratum of society to partake in this trend cycle. With lessening clothing costs and the increasing influence of public places, “new styles worn in the city were disseminated widely and quickly in the public places of modernity” (Phenix 9).

Alongside this increased attention paid to clothing, a culture of fashionable types developed within cities. The dandy is one such fashionable type that emerged in the mid-nineteenth century. The term dandy referred to a wealthy male urban dweller who lived a life of leisure in either Paris or London. Above all other pursuits, a dandy concerned himself with his own appearance in dress.

Because dandies were a part of the fabric of urban life and, thus, modernity, many writers in the nineteenth century took an interest in dandies and could be described as dandies themselves. Many writers, such as Oscar Wilde and Charles Baudelaire, took notice of more than just the clothes of dandies. Even scholars today note that a dandy's clothes seemed to signify more than just adornment. One scholar, Rita Felski, writes that by "exalting appearance over essence, decoration over function," the refined dandy "voices a protest against prevailing bourgeois values that associate masculinity with rationality, industry, utility, and thrift" (qtd. in Bristow and Stafford 68). Therefore, the dandy uses dress, or visual cues, to set himself apart from middle-class values.

One of the clearest analyses of the dandy occurs in Charles Baudelaire's essay "The Painter of Modern Life" published in 1863. Although the essay discusses modernity at large, it includes a reflection about dandies and their social value. Both the dandy and the essay's primary subject, the sketch artist M.G., exist as integral figures in modern life during the mid-nineteenth century.

In "The Painter of Modern Life," Baudelaire describes the aesthetic marvels of modern life in part through the eyes of a sketch artist, M.G. The character M.G. is modeled after the artist Constantin Guys, who drew illustrations for journals in the mid-nineteenth century (Willette). Unlike the aloof dandy, M.G. passionately immerses himself in modern life: he scours the streets of Paris in the mid-nineteenth century and depicts the people of the city in his sketches. Baudelaire describes him as one who is "dominated...by an insatiable passion" (399). Although not a very good artist in the traditional sense (he drew like a "barbarian" and a "child"), M.G. captures the marvels of modern life in his sketches (Baudelaire 396).

For Baudelaire, M.G. serves as an embodiment of modernity, or a “man of the world” (396). He rejects the past and wholly embraces modern life both in his lifestyle and in his artwork. In his artwork, this embrace appears in both form and subject matter. The works of M.G. include neither classical compositions nor figures with an archaic form of dress, like the toga-clad figures in the paintings of Ingres and other neoclassical artists popular around that time. His works reflect the present in both form and subject matter. In form, his works contain the swiftness of urban life, as they are sketches. His artistic process also relates to this new swiftness. While M.G. is in the process of making art, Baudelaire describes him as “hurried, vigorous, active, as though he was afraid the images might escape him” (402). In subject matter, M.G.’s works display the people of modern-day Paris going about their daily lives.

Throughout Baudelaire’s description of M.G., we get a sense of the rapidity of modern life. According to Baudelaire, M.G. considers modernity a “flow of life” that moves by and he sees “astonishing harmony of life in the capital city” (400). He is attuned to this swiftness of modernity and notices its ever-changing appearance. For example, he recognizes the quick shifts in style among the Parisian crowd. According to Baudelaire, M.G. takes note of the changing fashions around him:

If in a shift of fashion, the cut of a dress has been slightly modified, if clusters of ribbons and curls have been dethroned by rosettes, if bonnets have widened and chignons have come down a little on the nape of the neck, if waistlines have been raised and skirts become fuller, you may be sure that from a long way off his eagle’s eye will have detected it. (401)

Within “The Painter of Modern Life,” it seems as though swiftness of life arises alongside modernity. Modern life imposes a hastened and ever-changing life. These changes may appear

small like the aforementioned shifts in waistlines and skirt volumes. Embracing modern life, M.G. takes note of these changes, even the changes in minute details, with his “eagle’s eye” (Baudelaire 401).

Clothes and their accompanying fashion trends exist in the fabric of modern life. Changing clothing trends can be seen as a microcosm for the hastened changes of life. Modern life also seemingly naturalizes fashion. This naturalization is in line with Barthes’s interpretation of myth. Something unnatural, fashion, becomes assumed to be a natural fact of society as it is undeniably accepted throughout the vast majority of the population. Even children succumb to this naturalization. Baudelaire, for example, presents clothes as a source of happiness for children. Clothes get placed alongside nature in describing the joys of children “when confronted with something new, whatever it may be, face or landscape, light, gilding, colors, watered silk, enchantment of beauty, enhanced by the arts of dress” (Baudelaire 398). There is no difference between a “face” or “landscape” of the natural world and the “watered silk” of a garment for the child. Nature and clothes become intertwined again when the children of the city are described as “proud as peacocks of their pretty clothes” (Baudelaire 401). Baudelaire does not seem to question why fashion becomes a natural fact of modernity but rather accepts it as a fact. Furthermore, Baudelaire’s association with fashion and the natural exist in descriptions about children making it even more of a fact, since children are likely less influenced by social decorum than adults would be.

Baudelaire, though, does not whole-heartedly embrace fashion in its entirety, even if he considers fashion a natural aspect of modernity. Most of Baudelaire’s criticisms about fashion emerge in the universal adoption of trends. Despite an overall tone of admiration for M.G.’s

cosmopolitan works that depict the crowd's ever-changing tastes, Baudelaire is disdainful of the fashions of the masses, or those who blindly follow current trends.

By adopting the ever-changing trends, an individual becomes transformed into the crowd. Fashion, thus, changes an individual's relationship with society, or the masses. Unlike the dandy who is named in the singular throughout the essay, Baudelaire refuses to singularly name those who follow trends. Baudelaire, rather, names the ones who follow trends as the "crowd." They are merely a piece of the "harmony of life in the capital cities" and the "landscape of the great city," always existing in the plural (400). Although terms, such as "bonnets" and "dresses," indicate the garments of a female, we know nothing about who a trend-wearer is. Is she a bourgeois woman or a working class woman (Baudelaire 401)?

Additionally, those who adopt the "shift of fashion" are drawn into comparison with the "regiment" through Baudelaire's close placement of the two crowds in the text (401). This proximity causes one to consider the extent to which the trend adopters and the regiment are similar and different from one another. They both bear uniformity: the soldiers wear their uniforms and the crowd wears ubiquitous, ever-changing trends. Both a member of the crowd and the regiment appear indistinguishable from his or her respective cohort. The regiment, though, marches with purpose to quite possibly "the ends of the earth" (Baudelaire 401). On the other hand, it remains unclear whether the crowd adopts trends with a goal in mind, or whether that cycle of trend adoption may ever come to an end.

Although Baudelaire describes the appearance of the crowd, the psyche of the crowd's members remains largely ignored. The reader does not know whether members of the crowd make a conscious decision to wear those garments or whether the force of modern life compels them to choose those garments.

Unlike the debatably unaware crowd, the dandy deliberately constructs his own appearance. In the last section of “The Painter of Modern Life” appropriately entitled “The Dandy,” Baudelaire describes the dandy “the wealthy man...who has no profession other than elegance” (419). As one could imagine, the dandy pays a great deal of attention to his clothes. Unlike the crowd, the clothes of the dandy symbolize something different than adornment. According to Baudelaire, the clothes of the dandy display “the aristocratic superiority of his mind” (420). Thus, clothes have the potential to signify much more than being merely fashionable. Clothes can exist as an outward expression of one’s mind.

The clothes of the dandy fundamentally distinguish him from the crowd, whether that crowd consists of trend adopters or regiment members. Therefore, different clothing choices transform the relationship between the self and society. According to Baudelaire, the dandy’s “perfection in dress consists in absolute simplicity, which is, indeed, the best way of being distinguished” (420). We saw a similar idea put forth in Roland Barthes aforementioned essay “Dandyism and Fashion.” Clothes can act as a visual signaling to distinguish certain members of society from others. Although the clothes of the dandy are simple, the details, or lack of details, provide subtle visual cues that set them apart from the crowd.

Baudelaire does not view clothes solely as a visual cue that ultimately acts to maintain power dynamics, as Barthes appears to do. Baudelaire views clothes as a potential form of rebellion against society, even if this rebellion may be short-lived. Fundamentally, the perfection in the dress of the dandy reacts against “the rising tide of democracy, which spreads everywhere and reduces everything to the same level” (Baudelaire 422). Democracy is a universalizing force, compelling everyone to be identical. Therefore, the crowd following the latest trends becomes perhaps the embodiment of democracy. All of the members of the crowd appear to be the same

with no individual psyche and they succumb to adopting a universal style of dress that arises like a rising tide out of seemingly nowhere.

Fashion, therefore, has different transformative potentials. For the crowd, clothing styles can place one among the others. Fashion, thus, serves as a unifying force among members of the crowd. For the dandy, though, fashion can resist certain social forces.

Although fashion can be a form of resistance, its use is short-lived. As Baudelaire points out, the dandy will eventually succumb to democracy's power. The dandy, too, will become part of the crowd in the landscape of modern life. Baudelaire cites the decreasing number of dandies in Paris as evidence. He claims that a decrease in the number of dandies directly correlates with the increasing influence of democracy over (traditional) aristocracy. The ideas presented in this portion of "The Painter of Modern Life" are analogous to Roland Barthes's view of an all-absorbing bourgeois class. For Baudelaire, democracy is the all-absorbing force. Both "Myth Today" and "The Painter of Modern Life" have different political motivations: Baudelaire advocates for a return of the monarchy and Barthes desires a revolution against bourgeois society.

For Baudelaire, the dandy was very much of his time in regards to the political and social climate. "Dandyism appears especially in those periods of transition when democracy has not yet become all-powerful and when aristocracy is only partially weakened and discredited" (Baudelaire 421). France in the mid-nineteenth century was in a seemingly constant state of transition: within twenty-five years, France had been under the control of two different monarchies and the short-lived Second French Republic. Due to France's transitory political and social climate, the dandy was very much of his time, according to Baudelaire, in this transitory period in France. Because he was distinctly of his time, the figure of the dandy with his

distinguishing dress was, thus, an appropriate subject for many of M.G.'s sketches that embodied this modernity.

With the increased power of democracy, dandies in France, according to Baudelaire, are bound to fade away, like a "setting sun" (421). Since dandyism, an outsider culture, fades away with the passing of its appropriate time, one has to wonder if clothes used to indicate an outsider status, or to form an identity, are necessarily short-lived.

Written in France around twenty years after "The Painter of Modern Life," Émile Zola's novel *Nana* reveals this fleeting transformative power of clothes. Like the dandy's identity, much of the identity of the main character, Nana, resides in clothes. Unlike the wealthy dandy, Nana occupies a different sphere of society: she belongs to the petit-bourgeois Macquart family, maintains a copious amount of debt, and raises a child born out of wedlock. Both the dandy and Nana form their identity through clothes. Nevertheless, this identity disappears due to the passage of time and natural forces. For the dandy, his identity is lost with the changing political climate. For Nana, her identity is lost with her disfiguring death due to smallpox.

The novel begins with an introduction of Nana as an actress in her debut role as Venus in a production entitled *La blonde Vénus* at an establishment more akin to a brothel than a theatre. The audience consists primarily of wealthy Parisians and many of the audience members are excited to see this new actress. The production, however, seems as if it's off to a difficult start: disputes emerge within the novel over who is featured on the bill and Zola does not describe the performances in a flattering light.

When Nana emerges on stage during the final act, *La blonde Vénus* takes a turn for the better. This improvement, though, is not due to Nana's acting skills. She is described as one "allowed to pose badly, to move badly, to sing every note false, and forget her part" (Zola 21).

Although badly suited for theatre as far as talent is concerned, Nana gains the attention of the audience. She gains this attention, not through beauty alone or talent, but through the costume that she wears during the final act of the play that causes “a thrill to run through the audience” (Zola 26).

A slight gauze enveloped her; her round shoulders, her amazonian breasts, the rosy tips of which stood out straight and firm as lances, her broad hips swayed by the most voluptuous movements, in fact, her whole body could be divined, nay seen, white as the foam, beneath the transparent covering. (Zola 26)

Unlike her previously worn “white tunic of a goddess,” this clothing, or lack thereof, reveals Nana’s physical beauty and displays an overt sensuousness (Zola 15). After her performance, the men of high-society Paris become essentially enslaved to her. Clothing, therefore, becomes transformative in shaping Nana’s identity. Before wearing the gauzy outfit, Nana existed on the fringes of society, barely making ends meet as a courtesan, as her few callers prior to her debut performance are unreliable monetarily.

As opposed to Nana’s revealing clothing, the audience members wear formal clothes. Although Zola describes some audience members’ clothes individually, the audience members can be viewed in a similar fashion to Baudelaire’s aforementioned crowd: they exist as a whole made up from parts, rather than a group made up of individuals. The clothing of the audience does not distinguish one member from another; rather, Zola describes the audience members as “the never ceasing flow of people” (11). This flood of people entered the theatre in droves, overwhelming the theatre staff. In describing the crowd, Zola presents a description of theatre crowd’s clothing. “Friends nodded to each other from a distance, and with the rustling of clothes came a procession of gay costumes and headdresses, broken now and again by a black dress suit

of a dark overcoat” (Zola 11). Like Baudelaire’s crowd, this collection of people moves together as a procession in which its members, for the most part, dress similarly.

Unlike the “very scantily clad” Nana in the final scene, the physicality of an individual audience member does not become revealed through his or her fashion choices (Zola 26). Zola focuses much attention on the details residing within clothes, rather than the clothing’s relationship to those individuals. Description of clothing persists throughout the first chapter. Zola, for example, mentions the “chignon on which sparkled some valuable jewel” and the “gardenias in their button-holes” on the clothes of the theatre audience members (Zola 11). The small details of the clothing that Zola discusses reveal the formality of the theatre, rather than the actual characteristics of the wearer.

After the debut performance of *La blonde Vénus*, the number of callers Nana has at her room grows exponentially. Nana becomes an object of desire for her newfound, wealthy suitors: at the beginning they refuse to take her seriously but desire her physically. For example, a count refuses to leave his wife for her, but nevertheless engages in a serious relationship with Nana. Additionally, a seventeen-year-old boy, George, falls for Nana, but refuses to tell his mother about her. Along with the increase in callers, Nana’s funds also increase in size. Many men of Paris start paying her debts and lavishing her with material goods. For example, one of her callers, Steiner, buys her an extravagant home in the countryside.

It is during her time in the countryside when we see Nana’s complete disregard for expense as it pertains to clothing. This is somewhat ironic considering that Paris, not the French countryside, exists as a capital of fashion. Nana wears a white, silk dress and parasol, yet chooses to run outside, ruining her clothing on two occasions in spite of her maid’s urging her not to do so. Running in a field while it is raining outside, Nana’s “little white silk parasol already looked

quite black, and did not cover [her], whose skirt was sopping. But this did not worry her” (Zola 150).

Nana’s residence in the country also reveals Nana’s own acknowledgement of clothing’s transformative power during her dressing of George in a nightgown, while he visits her one evening. Because of the nightgown George literally shifts from being a male suitor to a female for Nana. Although “he had merely put on a long night-dress, an embroidered pair of drawers, and a cambric dressing-gown,” Nana exclaims just “how pretty he looks as a woman” (Zola 152). Up until this point in the novel, Nana has never compared him to a woman, so this shift occurs seemingly out of nowhere spurred on by his wearing the nightgown. Even after having sex with George, Nana still places much emphasis on the nightgown. In fact, she places more emphasis on that piece of clothing than George himself. The dressing-gown, not George, is “like a girl-friend teasing her” (Zola 155). Clothing for Nana shifts George’s identity, while also becoming personified.

Because of her fashion choices and extravagant lifestyle, Nana soon chooses to become a fashion icon for many. Additionally, she fully enters upper class society: marrying a wealthy count. Zola describes Nana as a queen “that reigned at once among all that was most costly” (266). Her power in society exists due to her lavish clothes. She became renowned by the people of Paris with her “wavy costumes” and she “set the fashion, and great ladies followed it” (Zola 266).

Her newfound status as a fashion icon did not come without a high cost for Nana and for many others in Second Empire France “making money becomes the object of an almost sensual fervor” (qtd. in Benjamin 75). According to Egon Friedell, the ideal woman during the Second Empire is “a tart who sells herself,” essentially a woman like Nana (qtd. in Benjamin 75).

Appropriately, a hoydenish style becomes en vogue: clothing gets bolder (75). With this change in taste, a nouveau riche, such as Nana, is able to change the face of fashion for the upper class women of society.

Even with her newfound fashionable status in Parisian society and her increasing amounts of wealth, Nana still engages with the lower classes of society to a certain degree and so, too, does her lover, Count Muffat. After the count spends his day “walking up and down the Passage des Panoramas,” one of the Paris Arcades, he encounters lower-class prostitutes as evidenced by their characteristic dress (Zola 176). Nana also sees these prostitutes and describes the three of them as girls “with tangled hair and dirty dress” standing by the stores accompanied by men who are “consenting to be dirtied and bespattered by these hussies” (Zola 180). One of those men just happens to be Nana’s lover, Count Muffat.

This encounter provides two insights about how clothes function for Nana and, perhaps broadly, for late-nineteenth century society. First, the clothes provide a visual cue for one’s social status. The prostitutes, though they are occupying the very same space of the Covered Passages of Paris as Nana, Count Muffat, and petit-bourgeois shopkeepers, appear different due to their unkempt appearance. Additionally, the prostitute’s job functions in an analogous way to Nana’s role as a courtesan, an elevated prostitute, essentially. It is not the action during their job that is different as they both profit off of their bodies, but rather how they present themselves physically and maintain their respective social status within that role. Therefore, the way in which they keep up their appearance through dress becomes a key way in which Nana is distinguished from lower class prostitutes.

Furthermore, if the prostitutes were to obtain nice clothes, they would appear no different than Nana, a courtesan. One’s social status during Second Empire France can be superficially

shifted through changing one's appearance by adopting different clothing styles. Furthermore, at this time there existed an anxiety in regards to the increasing fluidness of fashions among classes. This fluidness came from the expansion of the luxury goods business and the decrease in the price of goods due to industrialization. In 1872, a few years after the end of the Second Empire, Charles Blanc, an art critic, writes that it was during the Second Empire when "family ties grew slack and an ever-increasing luxury corrupted morals to such an extent that it became difficult to distinguish an honest woman from a courtesan on the basis of clothing alone" (Benjamin 74). Throughout all classes, women's clothing becomes designed as to not impede motion. For example, the previously broad crinoline decreases in size and is replaced with bustles. In Second Empire France, this increased ability to move allows women of all different social classes and occupations to move freely throughout the city and exist as visible to the public.

Another insight emerges due to Nana and her lover's being around the lower-class prostitutes. Although clothing maintains specific appearances, clothing's use as identity could be at its core meaningless. Nonetheless, both Nana and Count Muffat spend large sums of money in order to maintain a specific appearance, yet they are ultimately no different than the prostitutes. Nana spends increasing amounts of her time with Satin, who maintains a disheveled appearance of a prostitute: she wears "boots trodden down at heel, dirty skirts, and a bonnet that had evidently been frequently soaked with rain" (Zola 280). Just as a prostitute would do, Nana roams the streets of Paris, such as the Rue Montmartre, with Satin. Count Muffat, despite his very wealthy background and upper-class appearance, also spends time with the prostitutes. Zola, thus, presents clothes as only keeping up appearances of a specific social status, not an actual thing that fundamentally makes people different.

Clothing is presented as fundamentally meaningless by Zola; however, the characters still place a huge emphasis on clothing, just like the members of the imperial court of Second Empire France. Zola too “understood well the power of dress to confer status and signify class power during the imperial regime” (Dolan 28). Just as in Barthes’s *Mythologies*, fashion in *Nana* functions as a myth. Propagated by stores and trendsetters in Second Empire France, fashion becomes spread throughout the larger culture. By being spread throughout society and accepted at large it naturalizes the supposed social realities: it separates the courtesans from prostitutes and the upper class member of society from the lower class. Social differences become tied up in something that presents itself as frivolous and decadent.

Characters in the novel place a large emphasis on clothing because of its power, because clothing never truly appears to be oppressive or revolutionary. Of course, Nana becomes visible to the elite of French society due to her costuming in the final scene of *La blonde Vénus*, as was mentioned before. Clothing acted as a way to maintain class status and personal identity. For example, Nana discovered that the most effective way to scorn Count Muffat was to destroy “the official dignity of his costume,” his chamberlain outfit (qtd. in Dolan 27). Ruining and removing status-revealing clothing, thus, is presented as a much more heinous action than to insult another’s personal characteristics.

As the novel progresses, Zola reveals that Nana’s spending habits become increasingly decadent. She is described as owning “dresses, costing ten thousand francs, worn only twice” (Zola 356). Furthermore, the high costs of the fashions more than the object itself become the object of desire for Nana. “She could never see anything costing a great deal without desiring it; she thus created around her a continual devastation of flowers and precious knick-knacks, being all the more delighted in proportion to the price paid for them” (Zola 356). This consumption

relates to Nana's proclivity to spend time strolling through the Arcades, as that is a site for lavish consumption.

Throughout the novel, Nana continues to grow unhappier. The copious amount of money she spends on luxury goods does nothing to increase her happiness. "Yet, in the midst of her luxury, in the midst of that court, Nana was bored to death" (Zola 277). Additionally, her relationship with Count Muffat fails. Nana disappears one day from Parisian life, having sold all of her material goods: "she procured herself the emotion of a sale by auction, sweeping everything off – the mansion, the furniture, the jewelry, and even the dresses and the linen" (Zola 395). Presumably, Nana moved away from Paris; however, there was much discussion about her whereabouts directly after her exit from public life. After some months passed, though, she becomes forgotten.

During the final chapter, Nana returns, yet she exists in a much different condition than when she had left the city. She has been afflicted with smallpox, which leads to her disfigurement and the destruction of her physical appearance that she had maintained up until the disease. She is nearly dead upon returning to Paris. Zola describes Nana as she lies on her deathbed:

Nana was left alone, her face turned upwards in the candle-light. It was a charnel-house, a mass of humour and blood, a shovelful of putrid flesh, thrown there on a cushion. The pustules had invaded the entire face, one touching the other; and, faded, sunk in, and with the greyish aspect of mud, they already seemed like a mouldiness of the earth on that shapeless pulp, in which the features were no longer recognisable...Venus was decomposing. (Zola 409)

Clothes, therefore, had little influence on transforming Nana and shifting her social status permanently. Nana still faced an unavoidable death and she also did not transcend her impoverished life that was presented in the beginning of the novel.

Her death is also marked by premonitions of the end of Second Empire France with battle cries of “To Berlin! to Berlin! to Berlin!” in the streets, while Nana is dying (Zola 398). These battle cries call for the Franco-Prussian war that ended the Second Empire. Just like Nana, the lavish consumption of those in France at the time did little to maintain society’s power. The appearances afforded by lavish fashions in the court did little to create long-lasting power. Second Empire France, a period when there was “a society where great names and great infamies elbowed each other in the same appetite for pleasure,” was coming to an end (Zola 348).

Chapter 3. Consumption: Trends and the Self

For both Nana and Second Empire France as a whole, fashion does not provide a means to escape from death or final destruction. Furthermore, fashion seems to necessitate death in other works. For example, Walter Benjamin essentially equates fashion to death in *The Arcades Project*, a work that reflects upon the culture surrounding the Covered Passages of Paris throughout their history. *The Arcades Project*, an unfinished text upon Benjamin's death in 1940, primarily reflects upon the Arcades when they were at their height of popularity in the nineteenth century.

For Benjamin, fashion inherently links the organic with the inorganic, or the living with the dead. The dead within *The Arcades Project* takes many forms. For example, fashion gets compared to both a mannequin and a corpse. Fashion appears to forestall death and may even do so successfully for a while. Fashion's constantly changing details – for example, the slight modifications in a cut of a dress that M.G. observes in “The Painter of Modern Life” – create a constantly new face for clothing that appears very much alive and always renewed, which appears to oppose death.

Although *The Arcades Project* is primarily a work of fragments removed from their original contexts, Benjamin includes some of his own quotations, which are interspersed throughout this work. For example, he writes that “fashion was never anything other than the parody of the motley cadaver, provocation of death through the woman, and bitter colloquy with decay whispered between shrill bursts of mechanical laughter. That is fashion” (63). This quote emphasizes fashion's relation to death, yet fashion still directly opposes death. It is, specifically, a “parody,” “provocation,” and “colloquy” in death (Benjamin 63). These words, of course, imply some degree of lightheartedness. Fashion, therefore, does not take death entirely seriously.

This, therefore, points to the tension between the seeming frivolousness and the power afforded by clothing. As Benjamin writes, these are fashion's "uttermost extremes: frivolity and death" (70).

The frivolity of fashion allows clothing choices to become a form of entertainment for many. Of course, fashion can quite literally be a form of entertainment as evidenced by costuming in theatre. In this case, onlookers examine the fashion of those on the stage, just as the audience in *Nana* does while examining Nana's outfit during the opening night of *La blonde Vénus*.

Additionally, fashion can take a less literal form of theatre entertainment. According to Benjamin, those who adopt certain fashion choices engage in a theatre of self-construction. The creation of a self, though, can never truly be innovative due to fashion's "true dialectical nature" because of "the unique self-construction of the newest in the medium of what has been" (Benjamin 64). The adoption of certain trends provides the appearance of creating a seemingly new identity; however, both identity and fashion can never truly be innovative. Both arise from preceding events and already ingrained aspects of society. That is, the new is just a reinterpretation of the old. Rather than creating any real progress, fashion in *The Arcades Project* is presented as an "endless reiteration of novelty and obsolescence, each caught in an endlessly self-cancelling relationship with the other" (Wollen 139). Even though fashion never offers anything truly innovative and can, thus, never construct a truly new self, many still use the latest fashions as a form of self-construction. Wearers believe that they can be transformed just by a mere outfit choice. They believe that they too can become a sort of Nana figure, transformed by wearing one piece of gauzelike clothing.

This perceived self-construction, though, remains only as long as the clothes themselves are present on the wearer's body. Benjamin cites Alphonse Karr's anecdote about a "woman of taste" undressing at night and removing her clothing that she has worn during the day (qtd. in Benjamin 63). If upon taking off her clothes, the woman finds herself to be the person that she "pretended to be during the day," she would end up drowning in her own tears by the next morning (qtd. in Benjamin 63). Therefore, the self-construction afforded by clothing is only useful for wearers to form their identity relation to the world, or society; wearers do not actually view fashion as fundamentally changing themselves. Fashion, therefore, exists as a spectacle for others to see. Benjamin views a woman's "worn-out ceaselessly performing body" as "exhibiting the consumption of mortal energy" (Leslie 104). The transformative power of clothing, thus, grounds itself at the site of one's body, not in the formation of one's individual identity. Through performance, one's body, an external object, is constructed as visible for others. Essentially, fashion's supposed power to construct an identity lies at the sight of the external as opposed to the internal.

After this anecdote about the undressing woman, Benjamin presents Karr's theory of clothing in relation to the self. For Karr, fashion follows a rationalist theory: the form of clothing follows its function. Certain aspects of clothing, for example, may serve to conceal a supposed unfortunate component of one's physical appearance.

Benjamin, though, focuses much more on a theory of fashion that is not so much grounded in the utility of certain clothing choices throughout "Convolute B" of *The Arcades Project*. Benjamin's view of clothing actually tends to parallel Barthes's understanding of fashion. Fashion and its associated self-construction are synonymous with the ideology of the

bourgeoisie. Fashion is a symbol for implicit assumptions about society with its constant transformation of its own appearance.

Similar to *Mythologies* in which Barthes depicts bourgeois society as co-opting the language, or markers, of others, Benjamin presents the bourgeois adoption of clothing choices. In *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin puts forth an anecdote from Friedrich Theodor Vischer about a man wearing a collar that appears identical to the collar worn by Catholic clerics. Of course, this man is not a priest. He chooses to wear the collar because it is “the very latest in fashion” (qtd. in Benjamin 68). An author upon seeing this man’s peculiar fashion choice notes that the collar signifies much more than a fashion choice. The collar signifies everything, “concordats included!” (qtd. in Benjamin 68). Therefore, a particular fashion choice can speak about so much more than just an aesthetic position. It can implicitly align itself with larger societal matters, such as a concordat, a treaty between the Vatican and secular states. Ultimately, these larger societal matters are connected to something that has, as Benjamin puts it, at its utmost extreme frivolousness.

The bourgeoisie may also adopt the appearance of the lower classes when it is politically convenient, an example of fashion’s constantly changing appearance. Unlike the lavish consumption and the associated bold fashions of Second Empire France, fashion appeared much simpler around the beginning of the French Revolution in 1789. Benjamin presents a quote by Eduard Foucaud. Regarding the French Revolution, Foucaud writes that “cotton fabrics replace brocades and satins...and before long, thanks to the revolutionary spirit, the dress of the lower classes becomes more seemly and agreeable to the eye” (qtd. in Benjamin 75). In this case, fashion presupposes a more uniform appearance among social classes, at least as far as fabric choices are concerned, at a time when equality was being fought for. Of course, this example

directly relates to Barthes's ideas about the details on clothing presented in "Dandyism and Fashion": the subtle details on clothing serve to uphold the existing class structure. Despite an illusion that there is equality among classes because clothing styles throughout are relatively similar (i.e., for all classes garments are made from cotton fabric), certain details maintain the already established social order (there could be, for example, subtle differences in the quality of cotton among different classes).

At a time of the French Revolution when those appearing to be nobles were being imprisoned or killed, those of high society maintained their existence by adopting the previously unfashionable dress of the lower class. Foucaud, though, did not reveal that this change in dress was done out of necessity. Rather, the tastes among the upper-class in society actually shifted: cotton became proper and "more agreeable to the eye" than the previously worn luxurious fabrics (qtd. in Benjamin 75).

Those in power are, thus, able to freely adopt the clothing of others as part of the ever-changing thing that is fashion, whether that adoption is a priest's collar or simple cotton fabric. In fact, the latest in fashion does not only take cues from other strata of society: it "takes its cue from everything" (qtd. in Benjamin 73). Benjamin, for example, describes an instance where fashion adopts the characteristics of the symphony. Fashion's possible absorption of everything in the world acts to commodify the world.

Fashion becomes a reflection of the world in which its wearers are living. In other words, it transforms the world into a commodity. Of course, society is driven by its dominant political power and, consequently, fashion too is necessarily bound to the interests of the ruling class. Benjamin cites that "fashion functions as camouflage for quite specific interests of the ruling class" (qtd. in Benjamin 71). As Barthes does, Benjamin presents the ruling class as

fundamentally against change. Benjamin quotes Brecht: “Rulers have a great aversion to violent changes. They want everything to stay the same – if possible for a thousand years” (qtd. in Benjamin 71). How then can fashion, something that has been established as trend driven and whose details are constantly shifting, be a force against change?

Benjamin cites economic conditions and the long established class structure of society as evidence for how fashion hides the values of those in power. Fashion constantly changes for those who can afford it as they can adopt the constant onslaught of new trends; however, the fashion of the poor hardly ever changes throughout history. One can view the clothing of the poor as, historically, more of a uniform than fashion. Benjamin creates a dichotomy between fashion and the uniform. “In his ‘First Sketch’ of *The Arcades*, he notes that fashion involves ‘a sort of race for first place in the social creation. The running begins anew at every instant. Contrast between fashion and uniform’—where fashion is ephemeral and uniform, set and fixed” (Wollen 138). Similar to the relative fixed nature of clothing associated with lower classes, the power of the lower classes has mostly remained stagnant. Benjamin uses a quote from Eugene Montrue to demonstrate this phenomenon:

Fashion...is a witness, but a witness to the history of the great world only, for in every country...the poor people have fashions as little as they have a history, and their ideas, their tastes, even their lives barely change. Without doubt public life is beginning to penetrate the poorer households, but it will take time. (qtd. in Benjamin 71)

Fashion may witness history, but it also reflects history. The reflection of history is seen through the shifting of tastes in times of political turmoil.

Although it is not progress, fashion did have its structure changed due to the increasing industrialization associated with the private-capitalist mode of production. Clothing items

became increasingly transient with this new mode of production because the “interests of its profit margin must continually multiply the possibilities of turnover” (qtd. in Benjamin 77). Clothing trends become hastened in order to generate more profit for the business owners. In doing so, fashion becomes less concerned with lasting use. Clothing does not last as long due to both shifts in taste and changes in production.

Since fashion already has an established structure of self-creation according to *The Arcades Project*, members of society buy clothing aligned with the ever-increasing trends and shifts in clothing production, even if it is costly. Benjamin presents the revolution in printmaking on cotton prints as an example of fashion’s ever increasing transience. This revolution has decreased the costs associated with buying dresses. “Every woman used to wear a blue or black dress that she kept for ten years without washing, for fear it might tear into pieces. But now her husband, a poor worker, covers her with a robe of flowers for the price of a day’s labor” (qtd. in Benjamin 78). By buying into fashion, the working class throws away its wages in something that is inherently transient. As trends decrease in longevity, price correspondingly decreases. Through a lowering of an economic barrier, or price, fashionable clothing now becomes attainable for the non-wealthy members of society. Despite the illusion that fashion becomes more democratic over time, the decrease in longevity of fashion due to decrease in price only results in lesser wealth for the lower classes.

Furthermore, fashion never trickles up in society, for lack of a better term. According to Rudolph von Jhering as quoted by Benjamin, “Fashion moves from top to bottom, not vice versa...An attempt by the middle classes to introduce a new fashion would...never succeed, though nothing would suit the upper classes better than to see the former with their own set of fashions” (qtd. in Benjamin 74). Of course, this does not prevent the upper classes from

appropriating the dress of the lower classes, adopting clothing that appears to belong to the lower classes in times of economic and political insecurity. Although the upper-class co-opts the dress associated with lower classes, this clothing does not actually become codified as fashion until the higher classes adopt those styles.

To return to Barthes's *Mythologies*, the bourgeois class continually co-opts aspects of culture, including popular clothing styles, making everything seem as if it were its own creation. If one views clothing as essential for the outward construction of one's self, then everyone's identity becomes co-opted by the ruling class. The ruling class deems what styles are en vogue and what the masses will uniformly wear. Even if one chooses not to buy into the ever-hastening trends, his or her identity becomes constructed by a negation of what the bourgeois class deems as fashion.

Conclusion

Even with a simple outfit change one seems to engage in a transformation outside of just an exchange of one garment for another. Perhaps, this change thrusts one from seeming to exist in one class of society to another as presented in Zola. The outfit change may have also been motivated by what one reads in a fashion magazine as is presented in the *Fashion System*. The new clothing could have been purchased at a fast fashion store, which regurgitates trends perhaps quicker than Benjamin could have imagined.

On whatever level transformation occurs, fashion, at least in modern society, is an essentially inescapable aspect of daily life. Most make a conscious decision to wear certain garments each day. Even though this decision may seem trivial, certain clothing choices seem to suggest much about the self.

Clothing choices, although they can be used to change one's social status as in *Nana* or to challenge certain social values as in "The Painter of Modern Life," ultimately cannot permanently change an individual's relationship to society. Individuals become absorbed into the crowd by adopting the trends that the ruling class deems as fashionable. If individuals choose to not adopt these trends, they maintain their predetermined place in society. Fashion in spite of its own ever-changing appearance upholds existing class structure. The written language involved in advertising clothes and the propagation of trends only serve to maintain the already existing economic circumstances of that individual. Nevertheless, fashion itself is transformative: the appearance of clothing items change with trends and the written language changes the relationship with the garment and the individual. Fundamentally, fashion itself is transformative; however, this transformation is not afforded to the individual in relation to society.

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